

Communication Strategy and Social Marketing in Promoting Inclusive Education: A Human Capital Perspective from Indonesian Higher Education

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ABSTRACT:

This study examines the roles of communication strategy and social marketing in promoting inclusive education in higher education from a human capital perspective. A quantitative research design was employed using Structural Equation Modeling Partial Least Squares (SEM-PLS). Data were collected from 434 students, lecturers, and administrative staff at Universitas Multimedia Nusantara (UMN), Indonesia, using purposive sampling. The results show that communication strategy significantly influences social marketing and inclusive education, while social marketing significantly influences inclusive education. Social marketing also partially mediates the relationship between communication strategy and inclusive education. These findings indicate that institutional communication contributes to inclusive education both directly and through behavior-oriented social marketing initiatives that strengthen awareness, participation, and support for students with disabilities. From a human capital perspective, the findings highlight the importance of developing the awareness, engagement, and supportive capabilities of university stakeholders in strengthening inclusive educational practices. The study contributes empirical evidence from Indonesian higher education by positioning social marketing as a mechanism linking institutional communication with inclusive educational practices. The findings provide practical implications for universities seeking to strengthen disability inclusion through integrated communication, stakeholder engagement, and human capital development strategies.

Keywords: Inclusive education; social marketing; Communication strategy; higher education; students with disabilities; disability services

1. Introduction

Inclusive education has become an important priority in higher education as universities seek to ensure equitable access, participation, and learning opportunities for students with diverse needs, including students with disabilities. Inclusive higher education extends beyond physical access and requires institutional policies, support systems, and practices that enable students with disabilities to participate meaningfully in academic and social life. In this context, universities need effective mechanisms to communicate inclusive values, policies, and available support services to their academic communities. Communication and stakeholder engagement therefore represent important institutional mechanisms for strengthening inclusive educational environments.

Despite increasing attention to inclusive education, universities may still face challenges in creating sufficient awareness, participation, and institutional support for students with disabilities. Communication that is unclear or inconsistent may limit stakeholders' understanding of inclusive policies and disability services, while limited awareness may contribute to stigma and reduce participation in inclusive initiatives. Previous research has indicated that effective institutional communication can strengthen organizational capacity and stakeholder engagement in inclusive educational environments (Miller, 2020; Al-Mahdi & Buckner, 2022). In the Indonesian higher education context, strengthening institutional support for students with disabilities remains important to promote equitable participation and inclusive educational practices (Nisa et al., 2023; Rini & Azizah, 2024).

Communication strategy can contribute to inclusive education by shaping stakeholders' awareness, perceptions, and behaviors toward inclusion. Clear, transparent, and credible institutional communication can help students, lecturers, and administrative staff understand inclusion policies, disability services, and their respective roles in supporting an inclusive campus environment. Effective communication

may therefore facilitate greater recognition and acceptance of students with disabilities and strengthen institutional commitment to inclusive practices (Miller, 2020; Al-Mahdi & Buckner, 2022). However, communication alone may not necessarily lead to sustained behavioral engagement or participation in inclusive initiatives.

Social marketing provides a complementary approach by applying marketing principles to encourage voluntary behaviors that benefit individuals and society (Lee & Kotler, 2019). In the context of higher education, social marketing can be used to increase awareness, reduce negative attitudes toward disability, encourage participation, and promote inclusive values across the university community. Previous research has highlighted the potential of social marketing and digital communication to support social participation and positive behavioral change (Walsh & Hennig-Thurau, 2021; Saputra & Fauzi, 2022). Thus, social marketing may provide a mechanism through which institutional communication is translated into stakeholder engagement and supportive behaviors toward inclusive education. From a human capital perspective, inclusive education can also be understood as an institutional process of developing and utilizing the knowledge, competencies, attitudes, and capabilities of members of the university community to support equitable participation. Students, lecturers, and administrative staff represent important human resources whose awareness, competencies, and commitment can influence the sustainability of inclusive educational practices. Communication and social marketing can therefore function not only as instruments for disseminating information, but also as mechanisms for developing awareness, strengthening supportive attitudes, and mobilizing human resources toward inclusive practices. This perspective highlights that disability inclusion is not solely a matter of institutional policy or physical accessibility, but also depends on the capacity of people within the institution to understand, support, and implement inclusive values.

Although previous studies have examined communication strategies, social marketing, and inclusive education, empirical research that integrates communication strategy and social marketing to explain inclusive education in higher education remains limited, particularly in the Indonesian context. Existing studies have generally examined these elements separately, providing limited evidence regarding how institutional communication can be translated into behavioral engagement that supports inclusive educational practices. Communication may increase awareness, but its impact may be strengthened when messages are developed into structured social marketing activities that encourage participation and supportive behaviors. Examining the relationship between communication strategy, social marketing, and inclusive education is therefore important for developing a more integrated understanding of institutional approaches to disability inclusion.

To address this gap, this study examines the role of communication strategy and social marketing in promoting inclusive education through an empirical study at the Disability Service Unit (DSU) of Universitas Multimedia Nusantara (UMN), Indonesia. Specifically, the study examines: (1) the effect of communication strategy on inclusive education; (2) the effect of social marketing on inclusive education; (3) the effect of communication strategy on social marketing; and (4) the mediating role of social marketing in the relationship between communication strategy and inclusive education. By integrating these relationships, this study contributes to the literature on inclusive higher education by positioning social marketing as a mechanism through which institutional communication may support stakeholder engagement and inclusive educational practices. Practically, the findings provide insights for higher education institutions seeking to strengthen disability inclusion through coordinated communication, awareness-building, and stakeholder engagement strategies.

2. Methodology

2.1 Research Design

This study employed a quantitative research design to examine the relationships among communication strategy, social marketing strategy, and inclusive education in the context of higher education. Structural Equation Modeling-Partial Least Squares (SEM-PLS) was employed to assess the proposed relationships and examine the mediating role of social marketing strategy. This approach was considered appropriate for examining relationships among multiple latent constructs and testing both direct and indirect effects (Hair et al., 2017; Hair et al., 2021).

2.2 Participants and Sample

The study involved 434 respondents from Universitas Multimedia Nusantara (UMN), Indonesia, representing students, lecturers, administrative staff, and several other institutional roles. The respondents were selected using purposive sampling based on their relevance to the university context and their potential awareness of inclusive education initiatives and the Disability Service Unit (DSU).

Students constituted the largest respondent group, with 312 respondents (71.9%), followed by lecturers with 90 respondents (20.7%) and administrative staff with 22 respondents (5.1%). A small proportion represented other institutional roles, including ULD managers, laboratory staff, library staff, scholarship officers, employees, and other staff. In terms of gender, among the 431 respondents who reported their gender, 223 (51.4%) were female and 208 (47.9%) were male. Regarding age, 336 respondents (77.4%) were aged 30 years or younger, followed by 43 (9.9%) aged 31-40 years, 31 (7.1%) aged 41-50 years, and 23 (5.3%) aged above 50 years. One respondent did not report age and three respondents did not report gender. The respondents represented diverse academic backgrounds. The largest groups came from Strategic Communication (34.3%), Management (23.0%), Journalism (9.5%), and Visual Communication Design (6.0%). Respondents also varied in their duration of association with

UMN, with 46 respondents (10.6%) having been associated with the university for 3-6 years, 30 (6.9%) for two years or less, 27 (6.2%) for 7-10 years, and 19 (4.4%) for more than ten years. The predominance of student respondents reflects their role as key stakeholders and beneficiaries of inclusive education initiatives within the university context.

2.3 Instruments

Data were collected using a structured self-administered questionnaire distributed through both paper-based and online formats. Prior to the main data collection, the questionnaire was pilot-tested with 30 respondents to assess the clarity and appropriateness of the measurement items. The questionnaire initially consisted of 17 items, comprising six items for communication strategy, five items for social marketing strategy, and six items for inclusive education. All items were measured using a five-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree. The measurement items were adapted from previously validated instruments and contextualized for the higher education setting. Following measurement model assessment, indicators with inadequate factor loadings were removed, resulting in four retained indicators for each construct. The final constructs were Communication Effectiveness Strategy (CES), Social Marketing Strategy (SMS), and Inclusive Education Environment (IEE).

2.4 Procedure

Data collection was conducted through both offline and online questionnaire distribution at Universitas Multimedia Nusantara. Eligible participants were approached based on the predetermined purposive sampling criteria and were provided with information about the purpose and procedures of the study before completing the questionnaire. Participation was voluntary, and respondents' confidentiality was maintained throughout the research process. The collected responses were subsequently screened for completeness and eligibility. A total of 434 valid responses were retained for the main analysis. Questionnaire items were randomized to

reduce the potential for common method bias. The final dataset was then prepared for analysis using SmartPLS 4.

2.5 Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using Smart PLS 4 through two main stages. First, the measurement model was assessed to evaluate indicator reliability, internal consistency reliability, convergent validity, and discriminant validity. Second, the structural model was evaluated to examine the hypothesized relationships among the constructs. Hypothesis testing was conducted using path coefficients, t-statistics, and p-values. The mediating effect of social marketing strategy was examined using bootstrapping with 5,000 resamples. In addition, R^2 and f^2 were assessed to evaluate the explanatory power, predictive relevance, and effect sizes of the structural model.

2.6 Ethical Considerations

This study received ethical clearance from Universitas Multimedia Nusantara (UMN) prior to data collection. Participation was voluntary, and respondents were informed about the purpose and procedures of the study before completing the questionnaire. Respondents' confidentiality was maintained throughout the research process, and the collected data were used solely for academic research purposes. Personally identifiable information was not disclosed in the analysis or reporting of the findings.

3. Results

3.1. Measurement Model Evaluation

The results of the measurement model evaluation are presented in Table 1. All constructs demonstrated satisfactory convergent validity and reliability. The Composite Reliability (CR) values ranged from 0.917 to 0.930, while Cronbach's Alpha values ranged from 0.879 to 0.899, exceeding the recommended threshold of 0.70. The ρ_A values also exceeded 0.70, ranging from 0.883 to 0.901. Furthermore, the Average Variance Extracted (AVE) values ranged from 0.735 to 0.769, exceeding the minimum threshold of 0.50. All indicator loadings exceeded

0.70, ranging from 0.775 to 0.901. These results indicate that the measurement indicators met the

specified criteria for reliability and convergent validity

.Table 1. Convergent Validity and Construct Reliability

Construct	Item	Loading	Cronbach's Alpha	rho_A	Composite Reliability (CR)	AVE	Decision
Communication Effectiveness Strategy (CES)	CES1	0.847	0.879	0.883	0.917	0.735	Valid
	CES2	0.869					Valid
	CES3	0.897					Valid
	CES4	0.894					Valid
Social Marketing Strategy (SMS)	SMS1	0.872	0.885	0.887	0.923	0.749	Valid
	SMS2	0.849					Valid
	SMS3	0.900					Valid
	SMS4	0.806					Valid
Inclusive Education Environment (IEE)	IEE1	0.775	0.899	0.901	0.930	0.769	Valid
	IEE2	0.901					Valid
	IEE3	0.898					Valid
	IEE4	0.860					Valid

Note: All indicator loadings exceeded the 0.70 threshold. Cronbach's Alpha, rho_A, and Composite Reliability values exceeded 0.70, while AVE values exceeded 0.50, indicating satisfactory reliability and convergent validity.

3.2. Discriminant Validity Assessment

Discriminant validity was assessed using the Fornell–Larcker criterion and the Heterotrait-Monotrait (HTMT) ratio. As presented in Table 2, the square roots of the Average Variance Extracted (AVE) for each construct were higher than the corresponding inter-construct

correlations. The square root of AVE was 0.877 for Communication Effectiveness Strategy (CES), 0.857 for Social Marketing Strategy (SMS), and 0.860 for Inclusive Education Environment (IEE). The inter-construct correlations ranged from 0.539 to 0.772, remaining below the corresponding diagonal values. The HTMT results also confirmed discriminant validity. The HTMT values were 0.603 for CES-IEE, 0.865 for CES-SMS, and 0.700 for IEE-SMS. All values were below the 0.90 threshold, indicating satisfactory discriminant validity among the constructs.

Table 2. Discriminant Validity Assessment

Construct	CES	SMS	IEE
CES	0.877	0.772	0.539
SMS	0.772	0.857	0.615
IEE	0.539	0.615	0.860
HTMT: CES–SMS		0.865	
HTMT: CES–IEE	0.603		
HTMT: SMS–IEE		0.700	

Note: Diagonal values represent the square root of AVE, while off-diagonal values represent correlations between constructs

and HTMT values below 0.90 indicate satisfactory discriminant validity.

3.3. Structural Model Evaluation

The structural model was evaluated to examine the explanatory power of the endogenous constructs and the effect sizes of the exogenous

constructs. The assessment included the coefficient of determination (R^2), adjusted R^2 , and effect size (f^2). As presented in Table 4, the R^2 value for Inclusive Education Environment (IEE) was 0.388, with an adjusted R^2 of 0.386, while the R^2 value for Social Marketing Strategy (SMS) was 0.595, with an adjusted R^2 of 0.594. The f^2 results were 0.160 for the effect of Communication Effectiveness Strategy (CES) on SMS, 0.161 for the effect of CES on IEE, and 0.202 for the effect of SMS on IEE.

Table 3. Structural Model Evaluation

Endogenous Construct	R^2	R^2 Adjusted	Exogenous Construct → Endogenous Construct	f^2
Inclusive Education Environment (IEE)	0.388	0.386	CES → IEE	0.161
Social Marketing Strategy (SMS)	0.595	0.594	CES → SMS	0.160
			SMS → IEE	0.202

Note: R^2 represents the coefficient of determination, adjusted R^2 represents the adjusted coefficient of determination, and f^2 represents the effect size of an exogenous construct on an endogenous construct.

3.4. Hypothesis Testing and Mediation Analysis

The hypotheses were tested using the path coefficients obtained from the structural model

analysis. As presented in Table 5, all three hypothesized direct relationships were positive and statistically significant. Communication Effectiveness Strategy (CES) had a significant positive effect on Inclusive Education Environment (IEE) ($\beta = 0.159$, $t = 2.269$, $p = 0.023$), supporting H1. CES also had a significant positive effect on Social Marketing Strategy (SMS) ($\beta = 0.772$, $t = 33.552$, $p < 0.001$), supporting H2. In addition, SMS had a significant

positive effect on IEE ($\beta = 0.492$, $t = 6.853$, $p < 0.001$), supporting H3. The mediating effect of SMS was further examined using the specific indirect effect obtained through bootstrapping. The results showed that the indirect effect of

CES on IEE through SMS was positive and statistically significant ($\beta = 0.380$, $t = 6.638$, $p < 0.001$), supporting H4. Thus, all four proposed hypotheses were supported.

Table 4. Path Coefficients and Hypothesis Testing

Hypothesis	Path	Original Sample (β)	Mean (M)	SD	t-value	p-value	Decision
H1	CES $\rightarrow$ IEE	0.159	0.162	0.070	2.269	0.023	Supported
H2	CES $\rightarrow$ SMS	0.772	0.773	0.023	33.552	<0.001	Supported
H3	SMS $\rightarrow$ IEE	0.492	0.491	0.072	6.853	<0.001	Supported
H4	CES $\rightarrow$ SMS $\rightarrow$ IEE	0.380	0.379	0.057	6.638	<0.001	Supported

4. Discussion

The findings demonstrate that Communication Effectiveness Strategy (CES) has a significant positive effect on Social Marketing Strategy (SMS) (H1) and Inclusive Education Environment (IEE) (H2). These findings indicate that effective institutional communication plays an important role in supporting inclusive education and strengthening social marketing efforts within the university context. The findings are consistent with previous studies suggesting that effective communication can enhance organizational transformation and stakeholder engagement in educational environments (Miller, 2020; Al-Mahdi & Buckner, 2022). When institutional communication is clear, transparent, and credible, stakeholders are more likely to understand and support inclusive initiatives. In higher education, effective communication can therefore contribute to an environment in which students with disabilities feel recognized, supported, and included in academic life.

The significant positive effect of SMS on IEE (H3) further demonstrates the relevance of social marketing in promoting inclusive education. This finding is consistent with Social Marketing Theory, which emphasizes persuasive communication and behavior-change approaches to encourage social participation and positive attitudes toward social issues (Lee & Kotler, 2019; Walsh & Hennig-Thurau, 2021).

Universities that communicate the value of diversity and accessibility through targeted social marketing initiatives may strengthen awareness, participation, and support for inclusive programs. This finding is also consistent with previous research indicating that digital communication and social marketing strategies can support inclusive initiatives in educational institutions (Saputra & Fauzi, 2022).

The mediation analysis provides further evidence that SMS significantly mediates the relationship between CES and IEE (H4). This finding suggests that communication effectiveness does not operate only through direct institutional communication but can also contribute to inclusive education by being translated into social marketing strategies and engagement activities. In this process, social marketing functions as a mechanism through which institutional messages can be transformed into greater awareness, participation, and support for inclusive education. The mediating role of SMS therefore highlights the complementary relationship between communication effectiveness and behavior-oriented social marketing in promoting inclusive practices.

Furthermore, the integration of the human capital perspective within these findings provides a more profound understanding of how disability inclusion operates dynamically inside higher education institutions. From this viewpoint,

achieving an inclusive education environment is not merely an administrative or structural checklist; rather, it represents a strategic accumulation of institutional human capital—specifically the collective awareness, empathy, and specialized supportive capabilities of university stakeholders (Budiyanto et al., 2025). The strong direct path from Communication Effectiveness Strategy (CES) to Social Marketing Strategy (SMS) demonstrates that transparent institutional messaging serves as an initial investment that builds intellectual and social capital among students, lecturers, and administrative staff. When stakeholders possess high-quality information regarding inclusive values, their internal competencies and willingness to support peers with disabilities are significantly heightened. Concurrently, the significant role of social marketing as a behavioral mechanism underscores that human capital development inside universities must transition from passive awareness into active, voluntary participation. Cultivating this supportive capacity is crucial for creating sustainable inclusion, mirroring contemporary human resource frameworks which argue that institutional performance is heavily bolstered by the development of professional empathy and adaptive transferable skills among its members (Gultom et al., 2026).

From a human capital perspective, these findings suggest that inclusive education depends not only on institutional policies and communication systems but also on the capabilities, awareness, and engagement of people within the university community. Students, lecturers, administrative staff, and other institutional stakeholders represent important human resources whose knowledge, attitudes, competencies, and commitment can contribute to the sustainability of inclusive practices. Communication effectiveness can support the development of shared understanding, while social marketing can translate that understanding into participation and supportive behavior. This perspective is consistent with research emphasizing the importance of competence and professional

commitment in strengthening educational performance (Budiyanto et al., 2025). It also highlights the relevance of developing transferable skills, adaptability, and competencies to support participation in diverse educational and professional environments (Gultom et al., 2026).

From a theoretical perspective, this study contributes to the literature by highlighting the complementary roles of communication effectiveness and social marketing in promoting inclusive education in higher education. Communication effectiveness provides a foundation for delivering institutional messages and shaping stakeholder awareness, while social marketing provides a mechanism for translating those messages into engagement and behavioral support for inclusive practices. This perspective also highlights the importance of institutional human capital in sustaining inclusive practices, as educational performance can be strengthened through the development of professional competence and commitment (Budiyanto et al., 2025).

From a practical perspective, higher education institutions should prioritize transparent and consistent communication concerning inclusion policies, programs, and services. Clear communication can strengthen awareness and trust among stakeholders, particularly students who are directly affected by inclusive education initiatives. In addition, inclusive higher education should support the development of transferable skills, adaptability, and competencies that enable students to participate effectively in diverse educational and professional environments (Gultom et al., 2026). Universities can also strengthen inclusion efforts through social marketing campaigns that encourage participation, reduce stigma toward disability, and promote inclusive values across the campus community. Integrating communication strategies with social marketing initiatives may therefore help universities institutionalize inclusive practices rather than treating inclusion as a set of isolated programs.

Despite these contributions, the findings should be interpreted within the scope of the study. The research was conducted within a single institutional context, Universitas Multimedia Nusantara (UMN), which may limit the generalizability of the findings to other higher education institutions or national contexts. Future research could extend the analysis to multiple universities and different cultural or national settings to examine whether the relationships among communication effectiveness, social marketing, and inclusive education remain consistent across contexts.

5. Conclusion

This study examined the role of Communication Effectiveness Strategy (CES) and Social Marketing Strategy (SMS) in promoting an Inclusive Education Environment (IEE) within a higher education context. The SEM–PLS results demonstrate that CES has a significant positive effect on SMS and IEE, while SMS also has a significant positive effect on IEE. Furthermore, the mediation analysis confirms that SMS significantly mediates the relationship between CES and IEE. These findings highlight the importance of integrating effective institutional communication with social marketing initiatives to strengthen inclusive education practices in higher education.

From a theoretical perspective, this study contributes to the literature by demonstrating the complementary roles of communication effectiveness and social marketing in promoting inclusive education. While communication effectiveness supports the delivery of institutional messages and stakeholder awareness, social marketing provides a mechanism for translating those messages into participation and behavioral support for inclusive practices. From

a human capital perspective, the findings further indicate that inclusive education can be strengthened by developing the awareness, capabilities, engagement, and commitment of university stakeholders, including students, lecturers, and administrative staff. The significant mediating role of SMS further emphasizes the importance of behavior-oriented approaches in strengthening the impact of institutional communication.

From a practical perspective, universities should strengthen inclusive education initiatives through transparent and consistent communication and targeted social marketing campaigns. Such initiatives can increase awareness, encourage participation, reduce stigma, and promote inclusive values across the university community. Universities should also recognize students, lecturers, administrative staff, and other institutional stakeholders as important human resources in sustaining inclusive educational practices by strengthening their awareness, competencies, adaptability, and commitment to inclusion. Integrating communication and social marketing into institutional inclusion strategies may also help universities develop more sustainable and supportive environments for students with disabilities.

This study is subject to a contextual limitation because the data were collected within a single higher education institution, Universitas Multimedia Nusantara (UMN), which may limit the generalizability of the findings. Future research could apply the proposed model across multiple universities and national contexts and examine differences among stakeholder groups to develop a broader understanding of communication, social marketing, and inclusive education practices.

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8. Author Declaration

Originality and Conflict of Interest Declaration

The authors declare that this manuscript is original, has not been published previously, and is not currently under consideration for publication in another journal. The authors further declare that there are no conflicts of interest related to this study or its publication.